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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one faculty member worked toward becoming a more democratic teacher educator. The instructor proved that by re-examining one's teaching practice and working with students to create a more democratic higher education classroom, this can be achieved. The goal was to scaffold student learning by constructing a democratic community that was engaged with literature. The hope was that the connection between literacy and democracy would be revealed to the students through the social construction of meaning in the course readings. This revelation, theoretically, would occur as the students engaged in literary circles and participated in a democratic classroom. The study examined whether: (1) students would actually feel powerful and engaged in the democratic process; and (2) students would make the connection between literacy and democracy. Students completed surveys at the midterm. Data collected from both student surveys and essays revealed that the majority of students (55 percent) made the powerful connection between literacy and democracy. Four categories of thinkers emerged: the theory seekers; the practice seekers; the standards seekers; and the aesthetic seekers. Four appendixes include literature choices for the course; an team member self-evaluation form; a team self-evaluation form; and a rubric for evaluating team presentations. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

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"We Are Just Like Teachers"

Preservice Teachers Immersed in Literacy as Democracy

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Abstract

If we in teacher education resonate philosophically with the ideals of democratic classrooms in schools, we must practice what we believe and form our pedagogy accordingly. I was propelled on a journey toward becoming a more democratic teacher educator through re-examining my practice and working with my students to create a more democratic higher education classroom. My goal was to scaffold student learning on this journey by constructing a democratic community that was engaged with literature. It was my hope that the connection between literacy and democracy would be revealed to my students through the social construction of meaning in the literature they read together and through their participation in a democratic classroom. I wanted these two levels of engagement to converge and become for them an awareness of literacy as democracy. The questions that drove this inquiry were: Would the students feel powerful and engaged in a democratic process? What did they hold as most valuable in the process of sharing literature? And, would they make the connection between literacy and democracy? At midterm, students were surveyed and the data analysis revealed that the majority (55%) of students made the powerful connection between literacy and democracy. Four categories of "thinkers" emerged: the theory seekers, the practice seekers, the standards seekers, and the aesthetic seekers.

"We Are Just Like Teachers"

Preservice Teachers Immersed in Literacy and Democracy

Last winter, I invited a group of students, who were registered for my spring section of *Literature for the Middle Child,* to stay after class and discuss the upcoming course. Our journey began that evening: my journey toward becoming a more democratic educator and their journey toward empowerment and understanding. As they pulled up their chairs and gathered around me, I shared my thoughts. They were to be the Focus Group and draft the syllabus for the course. I had only one criterion: we were to read eight adolescent novels that I pre-selected. I asked the Focus Group to develop the organization of the course as well as assignments, activities, and evaluation formats. We had an interesting conversation that day. As they spoke, I sketched out their ideas on the inside of a file folder, and I watched and listened as an amazing dialogue developed. My blue ink sketches revealed what they held as important in the class and as vital to their learning. The focus group grappled with ideas and structure, which resulted in a strong draft syllabus for the course. Tellingly, during the final minutes of our meeting, as I was packing up my books and folders, one student looked at me and said, "We did it! We are just like teachers." And my response was, "That's because you *are*."

My goal for this class was to create a social learning environment where students experienced democracy on two interwoven levels. First, they experienced a democratic classroom by developing the draft syllabus, which included frameworks for learning, and evaluation measures for the course. Second, they were immersed in conversation about literature, which I hoped would open true dialogue and serve as a form of democracy. I wanted them to discover that there is no one "right" way to interpret literature and that

the pluralism resulting from their conversations would help them to think more deeply about democracy and each other. Most important, I wanted the students to become aware of the connection between literacy and democracy by immersing them in the process of socially constructing meaning from literature and participation in a democratic classroom simultaneously.

Theoretical Framework Woven Through Practice

The idea of democratic classrooms and schools has become a large body of research and interest for increasing numbers of educators. As this movement grows, many are taking a hard look at higher education and the seeming lack of democratic classrooms in our universities (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1999; Goodlad, 1994; McKernan & Powers, 2000; McMannon, 1999; Michelli, 2001; Murphy, 2001; Musil, 2000; Schneider, 2001). Researchers (Goodlad, 2000; McKernan & Powers, 2000; Michelli, 2001) assert that teacher education programs, in particular, must consist of democratic pedagogy rather than the historically authoritarian lecture modes. It seems clear that if we resonate philosophically with democratic ideals as teacher educators, we must practice what we believe and form our pedagogy accordingly. This is what propelled me on this journey.

My thoughts and behaviors throughout this experience were based on the seminal works of John Dewey (1938, 1944). He believed that democratic classrooms were the foundation for democratic living. Underlying his rationale for democratic education was a quest to create children who could think and engage in the social construction of meaning. More recently, Meredith, Steele, and Kikusova (2001) proposed that democratic classrooms serve as a foundation for democratic communities as they reveal

for participants the social construction of knowledge through active engagement in the learning process.

This concept of socially constructed knowledge is further grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky theorized that learning is a social enterprise, which is scaffolded in conjunction with a more knowledgeable other. It is through these interactions that understandings are crystallized. Vygotsky's work was the genesis for my educational philosophy. The connection between Vygotsky's social learning theories and the ideals of democratic classrooms are, for me, complimentary. My work assumes that knowledge is socially constructed.

Given these understandings, my goal was to bring Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories to life in my college classroom. My role was to facilitate and scaffold the development of democracy and socially constructed meanings through literature. I wanted my students to develop an understanding of the connections between literacy and democracy, and to eventually envision literacy as democracy. Meredith, Steele, and Kikusova (2001) contend that the process of constructing meaning inherent in literacy is the heart of genuine learning. Therefore, they define literacy as the negotiation between reader and writer and suggest that this is itself a form of democracy. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional literacy theories support this definition of literacy. Rosenblatt believed that readers engage with the author and meaning is negotiated based on what knowledge the reader brings to the text. It was my hope that the connection between democracy and literacy would be revealed to my students through the social construction of meaning in the literature they read together and though their participation in a democratic classroom. I wanted these two levels of democratic engagement to converge and become for them an

awareness of literacy as democracy. The questions that drove this inquiry were: Would the students feel powerful and engaged in a democratic process? What did they hold as most valuable in the process of sharing literature? And, would they make the connection between democracy and literacy?

Method

Educator and Researcher

I teach undergraduate students who are working toward a bachelor's degree in education and a teaching license. The foci of my courses are reading education and children's literature. I framed my pedagogy through my philosophy, and therefore, engaged in self-study to improve the quality of learning experiences for my students. My intent was to create an environment that could serve as a parallel structure for their future teaching. Fecho, Commeyras, Bauer, and Font (2000) also engaged in self-study as teacher educators. They examined their own practice in power structures. I followed their work and accepted their charge, "...we cannot expect teacher candidates to enact the complexities of critical inquiry if they have not experienced it in their teacher education courses" (p. 472). I believe that I cannot expect my students to create democratic classrooms through literacy without having experienced literacy as democracy for themselves.

Context

[redacted] is a true university town; the townspeople and the students are equal in number. [redacted] is set in the rolling hills of [redacted], which attracts students from in and around [redacted]. Students in teacher education come from various social and economic spheres, but remain a nearly homogeneous group in cultural identity.

The students, in the course I chose as my research lens, were all Caucasian as they are in nearly every course I teach. The university has an outreach program for improving the level of culturally diversity, but efforts thus far have not been widely successful in teacher education. The course enrollment at the time of the study was 42, 33 females and 9 males, who had the common goal of obtaining a teaching license in middle childhood education.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I realized I needed to find a way to measure the progress of our journey toward a democratic classroom. I decide to utilize the existing measure of instructor evaluations currently in place at the university with some adaptations in the timing of data slicing and content. This seemed the most logical way to gather the data I was seeking. Recording observations and reflections in this self-study created reliability issues for me. I struggled with self-reporting as a means of investigation, and concluded that I could not be a "fish in the bowl" and take an outside look. I wanted to be a fish. Furthermore, I strived to adhere to Dewey's (1944) philosophies regarding his description of the role as educator as not an onlooker, but a participant in the experience.

The data for this investigation was a midterm course evaluation instrument that was administered in the 6th week of the 10-week quarter. While I am aware of the constraints and inevitable misinterpretation of the instrument I developed, I chose to connect it to their prior survey-type experiences. The instrument mirrored, in language and design, the end-of-course evaluations they had completed for their instructors for the previous 3 to 4 years in their teacher education courses. I valued the anonymity it created and the familiarity of the process. The midterm instrument included both a quantitative

and qualitative measure. There were 11 Likert-scale type questions on the front page of the instrument and 6 open-ended type questions on the back. The instrument was administered at midterm with 36 of the 42 participants present, and all 36 students returned the instrument with responses for every question. The data for midterm was gathered after class in my absence, and placed in an envelope by a volunteer.

A team of graduate students, who were not members of the class, analyzed the midterm data. They tallied the responses for the quantitative measure and reported the results to me. I instructed them in the use of the constant comparative method (Galser & Stuauss, 1967, Miles & Huberman, 1994) to categorize the qualitative data. My goal was to provide both a learning experience with real data and to remove my bias from the data analysis. The results were presented to the class and used as a diagnostic measure to inform our journey.

Midterm Data Analysis Results

Table 1: Data Results from Midterm Survey

Content of Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I feel in control of my learning and choices				31%	69%
2. I feel my voice is important		3%	3%	36%	58%
3. I feel I can recommend changed is structure		3%	8%	39%	50%
4. I feel I can recommend changes in grading		3%	14%	50%	33%
5. I think the literature circles are effective				28%	72%
6. I feel I can contribute to my grade			8%	36%	56%
7. I feel I can contribute to peers' grades				44%	56%
8. I completed the readings			6%	47%	47%
9. I think the teams should change	58%	25%	8%	8%	
10. I think my team members contribute equally			3%	25%	72%
11. I think the grading is fair				44%	56%

The midterm results indicated everyone in the class, 100% agreed they had choices and felt in control of their learning. 94% agreed that their voice was important in the class. 89% agreed they had the power to recommend changes in the course structure, and 83% agreed they had power to recommend changes in grading procedures. Every student agreed the evaluation measures were fair and 92% felt they could contribute to their grade while 100% felt they could contribute to their peers' grades through evaluation measures. The results also indicate the students agreed (100%) the literature circles and teaming frameworks were effective. They wanted their teams to continue working together and felt team members contributed equally to the work. As I reflected upon the results of the midterm survey, I felt confident the opportunity existed for a democratic classroom in this course. I purposely use this language "opportunity existed" in accordance with Dewey's (1944) description of the dynamics of democratic classrooms. Dewey contends that individuals may not take advantage of or connect the philosophy of mind with the direction of the course of experience. It is clear that one student did not connect the philosophies with the experience in the course and reported that by disagreeing with questions 2, 3, and 4. And a few others felt neutral about some issues of power, structure, and grading. However, the results reaffirmed that I was indeed on this journey with my students.

The next phase of data analysis involved interpreting the essay data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Miles & Huberman, 1994). I led the team of graduate students through the data analysis by describing open coding and analysis of the concepts that emerged from student responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). They each made initial notes regarding the data and then met as a group to refine and

categorize the data. Next, they met with me to discuss the description of categories and to report their understandings of emergent categories. The questions with the data analysis follow.

Question 1: What is the most valuable thing you have learned from participating in literature circles?

The most salient response, 55% of total responses, indicated the most valuable thing learned was the importance of multiple opinions and group effort. The students were learning to value democracy and pluralism of ideas. They were aware of the importance of social learning. This was a major philosophical shift for many students. The theories of Rosenblatt, Dewey, and Vygotsky were evident in the responses. Students were making the connection between multiple interpretations and social learning, and therefore, making an implicit connection between literacy and democracy. This group of respondents was engaged in literacy as democracy, and they were, what I term here as, theory seekers.

17% of the responses indicated that students held as most valuable the practical experience of learning to conduct literature circles. These responses encompassed the value of the ability to use this strategy in their own classrooms and in field placements. They commented on the value of learning the organization and implementation of literature circles. These students were the practice seekers.

14% of the responses indicated students held as most valuable the importance of responsibility and accountability the literature circle framework offered. This group viewed the literature circles as a way to hold themselves and their teammates accountable

for the work of the class. This group held a somewhat authoritarian view of the work, and they were standards seekers.

14% of the responses were geared toward enjoyment of the literature. The responses indicated students held as most valuable the aesthetic aspect of literature circles. They were immersed in the literature and held as valuable the experience of reading and appreciating literature with others. They learned to appreciate good literature, and they were aesthetic seekers.

Question 2: What would you change about the structure and organization of the literature circles?

The most salient response was simply "nothing". 51% of the responses indicated there should be no changes in structure and organization. The remaining responses centered on adding or changing roles they were using in literature circles (20%) and increasing the time spent discussing viewpoints (17%). 2 responses (6%) indicated the need for more book choice. I agreed with these respondents, and in hindsight, I wish I had given this power to students. I assumed, erroneously, that students would lack the knowledge to select quality adolescent literature. My canonistic view of quality literature and my adherence to the rules prevented choice and power for the students. My errors were turning in my book order prior to the beginning of the class, as expected by administration at the university, and choosing only award-winning novels. Two other responses were deemed outliers by the data analysis team as they were not directly connected to the question.

The responses to Question 2 were discussed in class and some teams amended their roles. Additionally, the teams agreed to allow more time for literature circle

discussions. Unlike Question 1, this question did not allow for insight regarding how students were thinking about the connection between literacy and democracy. They were simply structural changes that were implemented to support our democratic classroom.

Question 3: What is the most valuable thing you have learned from team presentations?

Question 4: What would you change about the team presentations?

These two questions focused on the presentations and students responded (83%) they valued the strategies, ideas, and social issues presented by team members. Students also valued the opportunity to work collaboratively (16%). One student responded that he/she valued nothing about team presentations. This further illustrates Dewey's (1944) point regarding creating the opportunity for learning and the individual choice not to engage. For Question 4, 32% of the responses indicated that students would simply change "nothing". 27% of the responses focused on altering the presentation format and requirements. Others commented on allowing more time (19%) and amending the structure (16%). 5% of the responses indicated the need for all team members to participate and to adopt a more professional attitude. Again, these responses focused on the framework for our democratic classroom, and ideas were brought to the class to make amendments to the working syllabus. I did not gain insight into the connection of literacy and democracy with either Question 3 or 4. Students simply responded to structure and framework, rather than philosophical issues or connections.

Question 5: What about this class makes you feel like you have a voice and power in the class structure and grading procedures?

The responses to this question highlighted the vehicles for empowerment used in the course. They focused on the heart of what this journey required in structure and the

vehicles that supported or scaffolded the journey. The data analysis revealed the following structures: input to course outline and syllabus, input to grading, role of the teacher, and email conversations. 43% of the responses indicated that having input in the course outline and syllabus made them feel powerful. This response revealed they valued the working syllabus and collaborative decision-making. They felt they had a voice due to this interaction. 31% of the responses revealed that input in grading was important and gave them power and voice. These responses included the collaborative rubric development and peer evaluation measures. The data analysis revealed they valued this aspect of the democratic classroom. 22% of the responses indicated my role as a peer participant gave them voice and power. I deemed it important not to be an "onlooker", but a fellow journeyer. They indicated I served as facilitator, which created a supportive learning environment. 4% of the responses indicated our email conversations were valuable. I created a listserve where students could talk to each other and used this as follow-up to classroom discussions or to introduce new ideas in a pre-reading type framework. Students felt this vehicle allowed them to participate at a higher level of comfort. The responses to this question allowed for insight into what students valued and how effective our organization was in allowing the opportunity for a democratic classroom to exist.

Question 6: What do you feel would give you more power and voice in the structure and grading procedures in this class?

I hoped the responses to this question would include a critical analysis of our organization and the emergence of a more reflective democratic classroom, but 64% of the responses were simply "nothing". At first glance it seems that they were already

feeling powerful and I did not need to facilitate changes; however, I interpreted this using a slightly different lens. It is possible students were simply not able to conceive of how to create a democratic classroom or to improve our journey. Many students admitted that this was their first experience with a democratic classroom, so they did not have prior knowledge or experience from which to view our classroom critically.

Some responses did indicate students were thinking critically about the process. 15% of the responses indicated that students wished to be free of grading in the course. I struggled with this response. I continue to wonder, for example, if non-graded work is more democratic and if students feel bound by grades. As juxtaposition, I also wonder if students simply did not want to be held accountable for their work in this course. I do not have a clear answer to this dilemma, and this issue will be one I continually struggle with as a teacher educator. The political arena increasingly demands accountability and standards for classroom teachers, and the university climate is very sensitive to grade inflation. Non-graded work does not fit with the current politics of reading education or of higher education.

As a result of this struggle, I chose to use the midterm essay responses as a tool to propel us on our journey. I presented the results to the class and we amended the working syllabus collaboratively. The class chose to amend the guidelines for the final presentations and to abandon the use of a rubric. They wanted to "beak the chains" of grading. I was surprised how many students supported this view during our discussion as compared to the original fairly low percentage of responses on this subject. I left this decision up to the class, and the final presentations became a credit/non-credit grade. They were free to create their own criteria, be it verbal, and use the feedback from

previous rubrics as diagnostic tools to improve their final presentations. They also decided to choose any novel as the genesis for their presentations and abandoned the previous system of presenting from the novel they most recently finished reading. I, once again, struggled with my definitions of assessment and grading, but I did this without comment to students – this was my internal struggle, and I did not make it public.

Also in response to Question 6, 8% again highlighted the lack of true book selection. I was pleased to see this response for a second time. They wanted more choice in the novels they read, and I again wished I had given them this power. The remainder of the responses to Question 6 focused on allowing more time for group feedback (5%) and increasing the electronic discussions (8%). These ideas were brought to the class and implemented through our working syllabus.

Beginning Our Journey

Socially Constructed Frameworks

The Focus Group developed an organizational structure to allow for eight teams, each with 5 to 6 members, to read and share ideas about eight different novels (see Appendix A). They decided to use literature circles as the framework for the course (see Daniels, 2002). They were familiar with the concept and had conducted literature circles in a laboratory experience in a nearby elementary school. It was important to them that they use literature circles not only as a way to organize their discussion, but also to hold each team member accountable for the reading and participation in the discussion. I asked if they felt it was an elementary-type activity, and they insisted they wanted the structure and accountability that the literature circle framework provided. I would have preferred more informal, coffee house-type conversations, but they were clear in their

intent and choices. I left this decision up to the Focus Group, as I did the decisions that followed. This was an important first step for me. I needed to empower them to make the decisions that created the framework for a democratic classroom.

In addition to the framework of literature circles, the focus group developed an organizational framework for the culminating activities the teams would do to show they were reading and comprehending the literature. The focus was on two levels: teams could choose to do a presentation that related to the social issues they felt were connected to the novel or teams could choose to demonstrate a practical classroom application for the novel.

The Focus Group decided to utilize peer and self-evaluation, for both the literature circle participation and the presentations that followed, rather than relying completely on me for a grade. They even decided the weight that my feedback would have in relation to peer and self-evaluation. I introduced the role of fairness in this process, and we discussed the ability to evaluate peers without prejudice. This discussion became a philosophical stance for the Focus Group. They believed that evaluating their peers and themselves was key to creating this democratic classroom.

From Focus Group to Classroom - The Journey Continues

The first day of class, the Focus Group presented the draft syllabus to their peers with the explanation that it was a draft and items may be changed and further developed collaboratively to meet our needs. I noticed a mixture of responses to the syllabus. Some students nodded and smiled, while others looked apprehensive as they squinted in concentration about what this would mean for them as a participant in the class. The focus group and I fielded questions together and made suggested amendments. We

developed the concept of a "working syllabus". For the students and me, this syllabus would continue to be a work in progress. Students understood the outline and organization could change and the criteria for evaluation were yet to be developed. During that first class session, students formed their own teams with 5-6 members each and waited for their first task. I decided to focus on one group to develop a deeper understanding of the team process and progress.

Creating Literature Circle Roles and Democratic Encounters

I watched the students, sitting with their heads together, in a small campfire like circle on the classroom floor. Their first task was to create a team name, one that we could repeat without blushing. They made their decision quickly. They were to be called SMiRRK; it was an acronym made up of the first letter of each of their first names, but it also held a second meaning: Smith's Making Reading Reach Kids. They moved to the next task without breaking their campfire circle.

In accordance with the frameworks presented by the Focus Group, the course was to be organized in literature circle teams. Each team would engage in literature circle discussions for eight novels. I gave them sample role sheets and asked them to create literature circle roles for their team to use during class for the next ten weeks. This was important work. It required depth of thought and an amount of responsibility. They were creating their own assignments, and consensus was at the root of the democratic design for the class. They struggled between ease and quality. Some members sided with ease by arguing for easy tasks, while others made choices with purpose and learning in mind. They created their roles and decided that each team member would draft a role sheet, using the team's input, for one literature circle role. The roles were based on the work of

Daniels (2002). They decided to include a Word Master, Discussion Director, Master Summarizer, Connector, and Passage Picker.

Creating Collaborative Evaluation Measures

Once roles were developed and the syllabus was adopted, our next task was to develop evaluation measures. We began with the accountability of literature circle roles. The question was how do we hold our teammates and ourselves accountable for the reading and the work?

Students initially discussed these ideas in teams and drafted their ideas. Then the teams presented their ideas to the class. We used the chalkboard to web our ideas then created the instrument together using my laptop computer and a projector so everyone could see the document develop. We voted on format and came to consensus in regards to wording and the weight each items would carry (see Appendix B). Students were to complete the instrument after each literature circle discussion. This became a portion of their grade for the course.

Prior to developing our second evaluation measure, I began an electronic discussion by asking for "what counts" in team presentations. I hoped we would create a rubric for team presentations. The electronic discussion was rich, and I brought the ideas to the class for review. Using the ideas from the electronic discussion as the genesis for our continued dialogue, each team drafted their ideas. The teams abandoned the rubric development concept and focused on a type of check sheet more in line with their knowledge of evaluation instruments. I met with teams to facilitate the development of a rubric, but students were unable or unwilling to set the rubric benchmarks. I relented my goal and worked toward helping them reach theirs. They needed to rely on their prior

knowledge to complete this task, and I understood that much of our work was new to them.

The teams reported their ideas to the class and ideas were debated. The discussion was lengthy, and it became obvious that it would be difficult to reach consensus. I suggested we form a steering committee to further review the ideas and develop a draft evaluation instrument for the team presentations. Each team elected a representative to present their views and the steering committee was formed.

The steering committee took the multiple ideas and drafted the evaluation instrument. They reported their decisions and presented the draft evaluation instrument to the class. This instrument was adopted, and the vote was unanimous. This evaluation instrument was used to create a portion of their grade for the course (see Appendix C and Appendix D).

Democratic Classroom Encounters

Once our frameworks were developed, our work together began. The typical routine for our journey included two class sessions per week. The first class session consisted of a two-hour time block in which students spent the first hour engaged in literature circle discussions. The teams gathered in a common classroom and then journeyed off to convene in a location of their choosing for their discussion. Teams met in the lobby huddled together on sofas and armchairs, outside on picnic tables and stairways, in vacant conference rooms, and in our classroom. I circulated, listened, and observed during the literature circle hour.

We reconvened in our common classroom for the second hour. During this time, we reflected upon the literature circle discussions and reviewed recent journal artricles

focused on implementing and evaluating literature circles. I chose articles that varied in focus and design and compiled a packet that students purchased as a course text. In reviewing the articles, we discussed grouping issues, evaluation measures, and the development of authentic dialogue. We also used this time to evaluate our progress, make amendments to the working syllabus and time frames, and air any concerns or ideas.

The second class session of each week also consisted of a two-hour time block, and this session was used for team presentations. Each of the eight teams planned and presented a class experience that either focused on social issues connected to the novel they read or on reading strategies or practices that could be used in a classroom setting with their novel. Teams strove to create original educational experiences based on the criteria that were developed collaboratively. The teams and I evaluated each presentation using the evaluation instrument, and the presenting team also conducted a self-evaluation. The evaluations were gathered, and I met with individual teams to facilitate reflective discussion that would serve as a diagnostic measure for future presentations. We continued this organizational framework throughout the remainder of the course.

The Journey Ends

The end of our journey was marked by a final discussion of our experience together. The focus of the discussion was the answer to my final question: Did they make the connection between literacy and democracy?

At midterm, four categories emerged and revealed their levels of understanding: theory seekers, practice seekers, standards seekers, and aesthetic seekers. The majority of students (55%) made the powerful connection between literacy and democracy at

midterm. It was clear in their responses that they learned the value of multiple viewpoints when discussing literature and when engaged in our democratic classroom.

Our final discussion was informal, yet informative. I learned that most students had a true awakening to the value of pluralism. They reported the value of our social construction of meaning, or as they termed it, "...the sharing of viewpoints led them to new understandings." Many shared that this was a unique learning opportunity for them.

I believe the lines between the theory seekers, practice seekers, standards seekers, and aesthetic seekers were blurred that day through our discussion. The dialogue revealed for me a true democratic encounter. As each student shared what they held as most valuable in the course, I realized that to some extent they were each seekers of theory, practice, standards, and aesthetics. As each student spoke, others nodded in agreement. They held each of the views as important for our democratic classroom, and more important, they valued their peers' opinions. Everyone's voice mattered this day and all the days before. Literacy and democracy was interwoven.

Reflections and Recommendations

I feel my biggest success in this exercise of empowering literacy was the realization my students had about the impact of socially constructed understandings. Nearly all the students mentioned, at one point during the course, their strong awakening to the value in the viewpoints of others through the literature circle process and the democratic classroom. This is what I had hoped to be part of and to evoke in my students. Recently, a student said to me, "It was the first time I experienced a democratic classroom, and it has changed the way I want to teach." This was an outcome that I dared not conceptualize at the beginning of this journey, but that I am certainly smiling about

now. At the close of the course, I asked a student participant in the SMiRRK team to write a reflective essay of his experience. His unedited thoughts follow.

Reading Reflections By Richard Cox

When I was a kid, I loved to read. I read anything I could get my hands on. My mother even says that by the time I was five years old I was reading the local newspaper. Reading came relatively easily to me and it was fun. I could read what I wanted, when I wanted, and I could read as much or as little as I wanted. The choice was mine.

In the coming years, I continued my reading habits. I read books all the time. I ordered them from mail order clubs at school as often as I could. At nine or ten years of age, I could be missed by the family for an entire evening during which I would read a book cover to cover. By the time I was twelve, though, something happened. A lot of things happened actually. School began to get a little more complicated and time consuming than it had been in the past. Not only was the workload getting heavier, it seemed to be more tedious as well. Anything that I had to read became a detached search for some obscure truth or meaning or a philosophical scavenger hunt. Moreover, everything I was supposed to read had already been decided for me ahead of time. The choice was no longer mine.

My high school years followed a similar pattern. Pre-selected readings in the form of not only texts but literature, poems, short stories, and plays as well. I was not enjoying reading the way I had when I was younger. Even when I was confronted with something wonderful to read (i.e. Brave New World, To Kill a Mockingbird, etc.) , I did not want anything to do with it. Not until the Spring of my fourth year at Ohio University did I again truly enjoy reading on a regular basis.

[redacted] class on adolescent literature reintroduced me to reading the way it was supposed to be, the way it used to be: fun. At first I was overwhelmed with the thought of having to read eight novels in a ten week period on top of my other course work. During those ten weeks, however, I read like I was nine again.

We had eight books to choose from in our literature circles. Once we chose a book to read, we had to first develop guidelines for roles that each of us would perform and then choose the actual roles for that novel. Finally, we had the ability to choose what we wanted to read and what we wanted to do once we read it. Once again the choice was mine.

The idea of choice is what makes the realization of a literature circle so powerful. The freedom of choice is something that we value highly in this society. During the school age years, however, much of a student's ability to choose is taken away. The freedom of choice is vital to establishing a strong foundation for answering a number of questions. When genuine interest can be generated in a piece of writing or a subject or a topic, the need for asking things like "what does this have to do with me?" or "when will I ever need this?" is greatly reduced. The simple idea of choice was recognized long ago as a necessary component of life. The time is now to incorporate that same simple idea into our efforts as teachers and parents to get kids away from television and video games and into a good book.

I recommend that others in teacher education take this journey, as I did with Richard and his classmates. This experience required that I engage in self-study and relent some of my goals in order to empower students. It was necessary for me to reevaluate the typical power structure of my teaching. I often had to sit silently and let students control the discussion. Initially they made eye contact with me and geared their remarks to what they viewed as my goals. I made a conscious choice to break eye contact and look to others in the class for input and ideas. I tried to facilitate and scaffold, rather than lead and control. This process did not happen automatically and was not easy for me. I am still walking the path and trying to move steadily forward in my efforts to become a democratic teacher educator.

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Authors Note

I am grateful to work with enlightened educators in my college who not only believe in democratic education, but also live it and forge the path for others. [redacted] houses the Institute for Democracy in Education. I am indebted to Jaylynn Hutchinson for sparking my thoughts and to Rosalie Romano for showing me the pathway with a sly wink. It is my hope that others will follow me as I have followed them.

Appendix A

Book Choices for EDMC 321
Spring 2001

1. Bauer, Joan (2000) Hope Was Here
   Putnam Publication Group Juv. 0399231420
   2001 Newbery Honor
   Hardcover

2. Whelan, Gloria (2000) Homeless Bird
   Harpercollins Juv. Books 0060284544
   2000 National Book Award Winner
   Hardcover

3. Holm, Jennifer (1999) Our Only May Amelia
   Harpercollins Juv. Books 0060278226
   2000 Newbery Honor Book
   Hardcover

4. Peck, Richard (1998) A Long Way From Chicago
   Puffin 0141303522
   1999 Newbery Honor Book
   1998 National Book Award Honor
   Paperback

5. Spinelli, Jerry (1997) Wringer
   Harper Trophy 0064405788
   1998 Newbery Honor Book
   Paperback

6. Farmer, Nancy (1996) A Girl Named Disaster
   Puffin 0140386351
   1997 Newbery Honor
   Paperback

7. Nolan, Han (1997) Dancing on the Edge
   Puffin 0141302038
   1997 National Book Award Winner
   Paperback

8. Martinez, Victor (1996) Parrot in the Oven
   Harpercollins Juv. Books 0064471861
   1996 National Book Award Winner
   Paperback

Appendix B

Self-evaluation _____ Comments:

1. Came to the team meeting prepared (did reading and role)	poor	fair	good
2. Participated in team meeting	poor	fair	good
3. Overall quality of work	poor	fair	good
4. Was a helpful, respectful team member	poor	fair	good

Name of team member _____ Comments:

1. Came to the team meeting prepared (did reading and role)	poor	fair	good
2. Participated in team meeting	poor	fair	good
3. Overall quality of work	poor	fair	good
4. Was a helpful, respectful team member	poor	fair	good

Name of team member _____ Comments:

1. Came to the team meeting prepared (did reading and role)	poor	fair	good
2. Participated in team meeting	poor	fair	good
3. Overall quality of work	poor	fair	good
4. Was a helpful, respectful team member	poor	fair	good

Name of team member _____ Comments:

1. Came to the team meeting prepared (did reading and role)	poor	fair	good
2. Participated in team meeting	poor	fair	good
3. Overall quality of work	poor	fair	good
4. Was a helpful, respectful team member	poor	fair	good

Name of team member _____ Comments:

1. Came to the team meeting prepared (did reading and role)	poor	fair	good
2. Participated in team meeting	poor	fair	good
3. Overall quality of work	poor	fair	good
4. Was a helpful, respectful team member	poor	fair	good

Appendix C

TEAM SELF-EVALUATION

Rubric for Team Presentations
(Designed by the Steering Committee with team member input.)

CRITERIA					
Organization	5	4	3	2	1
Group Participation: involvement of members in presentation (give explanation on back)	5	4	3	2	1
Class involvement	5	4	3	2	1
Learning Styles	5	4	3	2	1
Creativity: new idea, engaging, meaningful, memorable	5	4	3	2	1
Usefulness (in future classroom)	5	4	3	2	1
Relevance to novel	5	4	3	2	1

COMMENTS: (USE BACK AND/OR SEPARATE SHEET AS NEEDED)

Appendix D

NAME OF EVALUATING TEAM _____
(YOUR NAME)

Rubric for Team Presentations
(Designed by the Steering Committee with team member input.)

CRITERIA					
Organization	5	4	3	2	1
Class involvement	5	4	3	2	1
Learning Styles	5	4	3	2	1
Creativity: new idea, engaging, meaningful, memorable	5	4	3	2	1
Usefulness (in future classroom)	5	4	3	2	1
Relevance to novel	5	4	3	2	1

COMMENTS: (USE BACK AS NEEDED)

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